

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, the author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie held a TedTalk conference¹ in which she discussed the “dangers of a single story”: how the lack of a more complete representation of other cultures can be detrimental to both parties involved, who is misrepresented and who is misrepresenting. Ian Hawking, on the same line, argues in his “looping effect of human kinds” theory how the categorisation of a group of people in a society is going to affect not only the way society acts toward said group but is also going to change the perception the people in question have of themselves and how they interact with the rest of the world².

Even though the representation of Black culture has increased compared to earlier decades, it can still be at times very problematic. Therefore, keeping Ian Hawking's idea in mind, I want to analyse how Western White authors have been depicting Black characters and, more specifically, how literature written by non-White authors has been influenced by the Euro-centric view that to this day still shows a patronising pity towards the African world. Doing this would also engage with the academic question of whether or not Black authors are bound to write about racial issues and how this affects society.

In doing so, I will focus in particular on children’s literature, as I believe the children’s cultural landscape to be essential in the forming of a more informed, educated and inclusive society.

METHODOLOGY AND TIMELINE

My research plan consists of a close reading and analysis of 12 texts written by African and Afro-American authors. These will be chosen among the winners and honorary mentions of the past few years of two important awards: the Burt Award for African Young Adult Literature and the Coretta Scott King Book Awards. This decision was made in light of the very diverse voices, backgrounds and contexts that characterise all authors and cultures. Even though comprehensiveness is one of the aims of the project, a selection made in the name of inclusivity but with no precise guidelines would risk becoming a patchwork of incoherent ideas that would not respect the multifaceted aspects of issues like racism and stereotypes. Following the tracks of these two prizes, on the other hand, will allow me to analyse what is considered important and representative in African and Afro-American

¹ “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Danger of A Single Story”, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lhs241zeg>, accessed 30/01/2023

² Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*, p.59

children's literature by intellectual juries that should represent part of the public eye (which is ultimately the one being influenced by these works).

The list of texts that I will analyse in detail is:

Coretta Scott King Book Awards

- *A few Red Drops: the Chicago Race Riot of 1919*, by Claire Hartfield;
- *Out of Wonder: Poems Celebrating Poets*, by Kwame Alexander, Chris Colderley Marjory Wentworth;
- *Piecing Me Together*, by Renee Watson;
- *March: Book Three*, by Andrew Aydin e John Lewis;
- *Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans*, by Nelson Kadir;
- *Copper Sun*, by Sharon M. Draper.

BURT Award:

- *To Kiss a Girl*, by Ruby Yayra Goka;
- *My Nightmare*, by Agnes Gyening-Asiedu;
- *Good Intentions, Evil Deeds*, by Juma Mwamgwirani Mwakimatu;
- *Treeland: The Land of Laughter*, by Mkama Mwijarubi;
- *The Devil's Hill*, by Ngumi Kibera;
- *Never Say Never*, by Anthony Mugo.

The approach for this analysis will be a comparative one, with two texts (one for each award) examined in detail every week. These close readings will be backed up by critical material both in the field of children's literature and of postcolonial studies chosen by me with the guidance of my supervisors. There will also be references to other literary texts that could help describe the issues of representation by White authors through time, such as *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, *If I Ran the Zoo* by Dr Seuss or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. The comparative method was chosen because it will allow me to make important observations on the differences and similarities between texts written by authors that were born and spent the majority of their lives in their native countries (BURT Award), and those who lived in a different environment, such as that of the United States (Coretta King Award). I will pay particular attention to the language used in the chosen texts and to if and how they are "writing back" to earlier representations of Black culture. One of the major points I will be focusing on is how narrative themes differ (or not differ) between the two groups I am considering. And finally, I will consider what message they are attempting to send to their young audience, trying then to understand what

effect this might have on society more broadly and what kind of future these authors are trying to shape.

OUTCOMES

The intended outcome of this project is better understanding the influence that the literary canon, as a construction that sees predominantly White authors as venerated milestones, has had on the writing of non-White authors, particularly in those writing for a younger audience. There is often a sense of even greater responsibility when writing for children, as their minds are even more impressionable in front of a story and because of the awareness that the environment they are exposed to is going to influence their ideologies in some way or another. It is therefore essential to understand the dynamics behind the choices that move an author towards a certain theme or vocabulary. Moreover, this project would draw attention to the very different responses to experiences such as racism or misrepresentation, which could sometimes be perceived as universal. These are based not only on personal reasons, but also on the type of environment, the information accessible or the education received.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Hacking, Ian. *The Social Construction of What?*. Cambridge: Harvard Up, 1999.